

The following is a guide to help you identify common grief responses in teenagers who are facing a loss. It should be noted that grief responses are individual and that each teen's grief experience will be unique.

- **Withdrawn & Isolated:** It is not unusual for teens to withdraw from their relationships with peers, family, and/or extracurricular activities. They may not talk to parents/caregivers because they may feel uncomfortable with the adults' expressed emotion. Although teens tend to talk more with their peers at this stage in their life, many report not discussing the loss with their peers for fear of being singled out or different.
- **Numb & 'Normal':** Teens may feel numbness, indifference, or disbelief in response to a loss. These feelings serve a purpose as they give teens some time to let their emotions catch up with the information and thoughts they hold. The desire for acceptance by their peers may also lead grieving teens to suppress their feelings in order to appear 'normal'.
- **Unpredictable & Explosive:** Teens may demonstrate intense sadness or anger triggered by seemingly random events. Anger can be directed toward family members, the person who is ill or deceased, God, friends, or themselves and is often observed in behaviours such as physical fights, rude and defiant behaviour, or angry verbal outbursts.
- **The Selfie:** A teen's reaction to loss is often self-centered. Their concern is with how the loss will impact their daily life. This focus on themselves is a normal part of their development as teens (*Who am I? What do I believe in? Who do I want to become?*), but may be perceived as selfish.
- **School & Focus:** Grief impacts attention in school, participation in class and sometimes grades as well. Teens seem to struggle with this more than other school-age groups. They may have trouble focusing their attention and appear restless during class, have difficulty finishing assignments, be forgetful, have changes in behaviour, and/or have erratic attendance.
- **Guilt:** Self-blame and guilt are common feelings. It is not unusual for teens to think or say, 'if only...' and feel responsible for the loss. They can also feel guilty for living while their friend or family member is dead.
- **Relief:** Teens may feel a sense of relief especially if a relationship was strained or abusive, or if a friend or family member dies after a long illness or experienced much suffering.
- **Physical symptoms:** Headaches, stomachaches, insomnia, changes in appetite, and general fatigue are commonly experienced in times of loss and change.

- **Risk taking:** May include skipping school, use of alcohol and drugs, increased sexual activity, or suicidal thoughts. Risk taking behaviours are particular to this age group and usually an attempt to escape from the pain caused by loss.
- **Fear:** Fear is a common and normal grief response. No matter how old we are, when our world has been shaken by the illness or death of someone we care about, we have no certainty that it won't happen again. At a time when teens are striving for independence, they are also asking themselves "who will take care of me now?"
- **A presence:** Some teens believe that the deceased is still with them and not really gone. They may speak of unusual happenings such as: hearing the voice of the deceased or seeing the deceased in a crowd. For some, it is comforting while it may be scary or unwanted for others.
- **Spiritual questions:** Questions such as "What is the meaning of life?", "Is there a God?", or "Is there an afterlife?" are all common.

How to Help a Grieving Teen

One of the most determining factors of how teens will cope with a loss is the response of significant others in their lives. They will respond to the invitations and behaviours of those who surround them. Here are some suggestions to consider:

- **Be patient and available.** If teens don't want to share at a given moment, do not assume that they won't want to share at another time. Continue to create opportunities.
- **Don't protect each other.** Let teens know that you are not afraid to discuss their loss with them and that it is not their role to protect you. Share your feelings about your grief or how witnessing their grief makes you feel. Be open and honest.
- **Acknowledge that all feelings are okay.** Provide opportunities and examples of healthy and safe ways to express feelings. Physical exercise, journaling, writing a letter, creating a scrapbook, drawing and painting are all examples of activities that encourage such expression and release. They can be experienced together or independently.
- **Encourage teens to tell their story.** Sometimes it's difficult to tell the whole story all at once. Ask about particular times in their relationship with the deceased (e.g., the most fun time; a time when they felt most connected; a happy time), to show you a place or an object that had special meaning to them.
- **Create safety.** In helping teens identify their needs and finding ways to meet these needs, we are providing them with skills for life. If they do not talk to you about their loss, help them connect with another adult they will want to talk to. Despite their usual requests for independence, maintain or even increase boundaries and routines. Increase your connection time with your teens: it can be as simple as sitting next to each other on the couch watching TV. We don't always need to talk to each other to feel connected to one another.